

JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM IN TENNESSEE

Tennessee's juvenile courts operate under the basic philosophy of striving to assure that each child coming before the court receives the opportunity for appropriate physical, mental, and moral development. The courts endeavor to facilitate this opportunity through consideration of each child's case on its individual merits while adhering to three primary obligations: (1) protecting the community and society at large; (2) acting in the best interest and welfare of the child by means of protection, treatment, and rehabilitation; and (3) upholding the dignity of the law.

Tennessee is home to 98 juvenile courts with 112 juvenile court judges. Of these 98 courts, 17 are designated "Special Act" juvenile courts, while the remaining 82 are general sessions courts with juvenile jurisdiction. Each of these courts, with the exception of Bristol and Johnson City, are county-based and administered, with at least one juvenile court located in each of the state's 95 counties. While all of Tennessee's courts with juvenile jurisdiction strive to follow the procedural guidelines established by the Tennessee Rules of Juvenile Procedure, there is very little standardization with regard to juvenile court size, management, and administration. Hence, Tennessee's juvenile court system is diverse and tends to reflect the needs and preferences of the people living within a given county or community.

Jurisdiction Of The Juvenile Court

It is said that more lives are touched by juvenile courts than by any other courts. Juvenile courts deal not only with delinquency and status offenses, but also with issues of child neglect and abuse, child support, child custody, establishing parentage, visitation, and the need for a child's medical and/or mental health treatment. Juvenile courts can be seen as performing the diverse functions of a court of law, a probation department, a "jail", a nursery, a welfare agency, and a mental health agency. Tennessee's juvenile courts have jurisdiction within the following areas:

- The adjudication of children as dependent, neglected, abused, unruly, or delinquent.
- The determination of custody or the appointment of a guardian of a child.
- The termination of parental rights.
- The ordering of treatment, evaluation, and/or commitment of mentally retarded and/or mentally ill children.
- The commitment of children to the custody of the Tennessee Department of Children's Services.
- The establishment of parentage.
- The ordering and enforcement of child support for children.
- Establishing visitation for non-custodial parents.